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AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

1. (Currently amended) A unit for feeding filters to a filter tip attachment machine, comprising a feeder feed means (10) by which filters (3) are introduced, a feed channel (9) along which the filters (3) are advanced, and connected to the outlet end of the channel (9), a dispensing hopper (4) from which the filters (3) are released to an infeed portion (1) of the filter tip attachment machine, characterized in that it comprises an inline a storage buffer having (16) of variable volume interposed between the feeder feed means (10) and the feed channel (9); and a movable wall for varying the volume of the variable volume storage buffer, wherein the variable volume storage buffer extends above and parallel to the feed channel and is delimited on an underside by a bottom wall extending transversely to the movable wall, the bottom wall also delimiting an upperside of the feed channel, the feed channel delimited on an underside by a conveyor belt.

2. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim 1, comprising: a receiving hopper (8) associated with the feeder feed means (10) by which the filters (3) are introduced and supplying the feed channel (9); a first monitoring and control mechanism for monitoring and controlling means (31) associated with the receiving hopper (8) and serving to monitor and control the level of the mass of filters (3) occupying the receiving same hopper; and a mechanism for varying means (39) serving to vary the volume of the variable volume storage buffer (16), interlocked to the first monitoring and control mechanism means (31) for monitoring and controlling the level of the mass of filters (3).

3. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim 2_1, wherein the variable volume storage buffer includes~~(16)~~ presents an infeed section associated with the receiving hopper ~~(8)~~, and the volume of the buffer ~~(16)~~ is varied by means ~~(39)~~ comprising a wall ~~(28)~~ capable of movement generated by respective drive means ~~(23, 24, 27)~~ between a first limit position corresponding to the minimum capacity of the variable volume buffer ~~(16)~~, in which it functions as a wall of the receiving hopper ~~(8)~~, and a second limit position corresponding to the maximum capacity of the buffer ~~(16)~~.

4. (Cancelled)

5. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim ~~4_1~~, and further comprising a drive mechanism ~~wherein the bottom wall is provided by the drive means (23, 24) operating the movable wall (28).~~

6. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim 5, wherein the bottom wall is rigidly associated with the movable wall ~~(28)~~ and includes ~~consists in the top branch (23) of a conveyor belt (24) associated with a motor (27).~~

7. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim 6, wherein the feed channel ~~(9)~~ along which the filters ~~(3)~~ advance comprises a conveyor belt ~~(18)~~ extending beneath and parallel to the drive mechanism ~~drive means (23, 24, 27) of the movable wall (28) and associated with a respective further drive mechanism means (21).~~

8. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim 7, wherein the dispensing hopper (4) comprises a second monitoring and control mechanism for monitoring and controlling a respective means (32, 33, 34) serving to monitor and control the level of the mass of filters (3) occupying the dispensing selfsame hopper (4), to which the drive mechanism means (21) of the conveyor belt is (18) are interlocked.

9. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim 8, wherein the variable volume storage buffer includes (16) presents two side walls (35, 36) disposed mutually parallel and substantially perpendicular to the bottom wall, and is equipped with a mechanism for varying a means (39) by which to vary the distance between the two side walls (35, 36), so as to allow of changing the transverse dimension of the variable volume storage buffer (16).

10. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim 9, wherein the feeder feed means (10) introducing the filters (3) comprise at least one diverter device (11) by which the filters (3) are directed transversely to their axes into the receiving hopper (8).

11. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim 9, wherein the feeder feed means (10) introducing the filters (3) comprise at least one device (45) by which the filters (3) are directed axially into the receiving hopper (8).

12. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim 1, wherein the feed channel (9) along which the filters (3) advance comprises a conveyor belt (18) extending beneath and

parallel to the drive mechanism means ~~(23,24, 27)~~ of the movable wall ~~(28)~~ and associated with a respective further drive mechanism means ~~(21)~~.

13. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim 12, wherein the dispensing hopper ~~(4)~~ comprises a second monitoring and control mechanism for monitoring and controlling a ~~respective means (32,33, 34) serving to monitor and control the level of~~ the mass of filters ~~(3)~~ occupying the dispensing ~~selfsame~~ hopper ~~(4)~~, to which the drive mechanism means ~~(21)~~ of the conveyor belt is ~~(18)~~ are interlocked.

14. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim 1, wherein the variable volume storage buffer ~~includes~~ ~~(16)~~ presents two side walls ~~(35,36)~~ disposed mutually parallel and substantially perpendicular to the bottom wall, and is equipped with a mechanism for varying a ~~means (39) by which to vary the distance between the two side walls~~ ~~(35,36)~~, so as to allow of changing the transverse dimension of the variable volume storage buffer ~~(16)~~.

15. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim 1, wherein the feeder feed means ~~(10)~~ introducing the filters ~~(3)~~ comprise at least one diverter device ~~(11)~~ by which the filters ~~(3)~~ are directed transversely to their axes into the receiving hopper ~~(8)~~.

16. (Currently amended) A unit as in claim 1, wherein the feeder feed means ~~(10)~~ introducing the filters ~~(3)~~ comprise at least one device ~~(45)~~ by which the filters ~~(3)~~ are directed axially into the receiving hopper ~~(8)~~.

17. (New) A unit for feeding filters to a filter tip attachment machine, comprising a feeder by which filters are introduced, a feed channel along which the filters are advanced, and connected to the outlet end of the channel, a dispensing hopper from which the filters are released to an infeed portion of the filter tip attachment machine, a variable volume storage buffer interposed between the feeder and the feed channel; wherein the unit comprises a movable wall which delimits a portion of the variable volume storage buffer and by which the volume of the variable volume storage buffer can be varied, and wherein the unit also comprises a receiving hopper supplying the feed channel and associated with the feeder by which the filters are introduced; a first monitoring and control mechanism for monitoring and controlling a level of the mass of filters occupying the receiving hopper; and a mechanism for moving the movable wall, interlocked to the monitoring and controlling mechanism, for varying the volume of the variable volume storage buffer.

18. (New) A unit for feeding filters to a filter tip attachment machine, comprising a feeder by which filters are introduced, a feed channel along which the filters are advanced, and connected to the outlet end of the channel, a dispensing hopper from which the filters are released to an infeed portion of the filter tip attachment machine, a variable volume storage buffer, interposed between the feeder and the feed channel and delimited at the bottom by a wall comprising a top branch of a conveyor belt moved by a motor and looped at opposite ends around an upstream pulley and a downstream pulley; associated rigidly with the top branch of the belt being a bottom end of a substantially vertical wall rendered capable of movement, generated by the motor, between two limit positions of which the first corresponds to a condition

of minimum capacity afforded by the variable volume storage buffer and the second corresponds to a condition of maximum capacity afforded by the variable volume storage buffer, wherein the variable volume storage buffer includes two side walls disposed mutually parallel and substantially perpendicular to the bottom wall, and is equipped with a mechanism for varying a distance between the two side walls, to allow of changing a transverse dimension of the variable volume storage buffer.